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From Context to Tradition: The Supremacy of Water Rituals in Indian Sundarbans

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, water has been firmly connected with any culture to sustain livelihood. Water has a profound relationship with human civilization as nearly all the ancient cultures were set up on the banks of rivers or large water bodies. In the Indian cultural context, water serves as the purifying element of nature. From birth to death, water plays a vital role in Indian society especially in Sundarbans regions of West Bengal. As a natural agent, water is found here to a large extent. The islanders believe water to be their deity, and they worship water regularly before starting their journey towards the mangrove forest for earning their livelihood. The present paper tries to explore these water-based rituals and how these rituals became tradition over the ages. The dwellers perform some rituals irrespective of their religions. They take the rituals as the unwritten laws of the jungle. They keep their belief in these rituals and obey with great reverence for their safe return from Mahal (working in the Forest). Making any exceptions to the rituals may jeopardize their lives in the jungle. In the Sundarbans, every islander observes these water-based rituals. These celebrations not only reflect their reverence for nature but also reinforce their vital connection to the environment. The islanders believe that the rituals may protect their lives in any perilous circumstances in the Sundarbans where the lives of the islanders are deeply intertwined with the forest and water. The paper promotes these water-based rituals which are observed over generations in the islands of Sundarbans and how these turn into a tradition. The paper will highlight the social realities of people of Sundarbans which acts as their context. Thereby, the representation of the traditions centring water will be the focal point of the present study. This paper will analyse how the contexts have been transformed and the traditions are settled down. How these traditions work as symbolic power and balance of the natural world will be highlighted here.

Key Words: Ritual, Sundarbans, Tradition, Water, Culture, Worship.

Introduction: Various mythological stories illustrate the significance of water as the source of life. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that life commenced with Lord Vishnu, who resides in a deep oceanic slumber. This perspective emphasizes the vital connection between water and life, showcasing the profound themes present in various cultural beliefs about the origins of existence. The world has Water as the predominant element and same

as with the human body. This concept connects to the intrinsic nature of life, illustrating how both the world and our body are intricately woven together by this vital element of nature. The Rig Veda proclaims: "These waters are pure and auspicious (which cleanses); These are the medicines (healers, physical and spiritual) of all; these waters help growth and provide prosperity for all."(Kasturi)

From African cultures to Indian cultures, the tradition of water rituals is of great significance, which is continued through the worship of water deities. Indian societies worship water as a power of spiritual cleansing. There is a belief that the water of river Ganges can drive away any earthly sin. The holy Water from the Ganges is kept in every household for purification before conducting any ceremony. Before beginning any traditional puja, rituals, or ceremonies or a wedding, a pot (generally kalash) of Ganga Jal (water of Ganga) is placed there. The water deities of the seven sacred rivers – the Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswathi, Godavari, Narmada, Sindhu, and the Kaveri are invoked into the pot. Symbolically, the water of this pot turns into sacred nectar, and it serves as the blessings of immortality. Water is sprinkled over with the chanting of some mantras to purify everything before the beginning of any religious ceremony. This paper seeks to bring out a portrayal of religious enactment and the lives of islanders surrounded by water.

Life is not possible without water. In India, there are many holy places situated on the banks of rivers and at the confluence of rivers. In Indian Culture, the holy water of the River Ganges holds a deep religious significance. It is believed that sparkling water of Mother Ganges has purifying power. In the way of salvation, the role of divine Ganges is beyond question. The cultural and spiritual bonds with Ganges posit its proximity in the lives of Sundarbans. Life in the Sundarbans is full of challenges and struggle. Human-wildlife conflict and natural disasters are a constant threat to the people of Sundarbans. To mitigate such complications, they become closely dependent on nature. As a result, the dependence on nature grows, and the culture of this region develops in harmony with nature. To them, the water of holy Ganges can purify any kind of fear, dirt and obscurity. Mother Ganges works as a catalyst in time of devoting any other God and Goddesses. They believe that without the holy water of Ganges, every ritual remains incomplete. The vulnerable riverine ecology of the Sundarbans helps the people towards the formation of such tradition.

The water bodies of these regions are mostly salty which is very vulnerable for fertile land and the dams. To keep the water bodies calm, they worship Lord Shiva. After the fulfilment of their desires, the dwellers offer salt into the water as oblation and chant as

“Atti Ganga Bhatia Panch Pir Dariya
Gaji Ganga-Shiva Badar Badar, Badar Badar”.

They believe that if Lord Shiva will be pleased by their devotion, Lord Shiva will provide the sweet water for their cultivation.

Water has an important place as a sacred element in the beliefs and practices of every ritual. Alison notes it as ‘To them the river is the divine mother, a goddess known as Ganga, Mother Ganga, Maa Ganga, a deity that can wash away your sins and your suffering, and take the souls of your deceased loved ones straight to heaven.’ (Alison) Many pilgrims flock to the holy towns to attain salvation and hoping for an end to their suffering. “The river is considered pure and it is believed that bathing in her will bring

redemption and liberation; so ritual bathing is an important part of any pilgrimage." as observed by Alison.

The islanders believe that 'Ganga ma' protects them on both water and land. The most renowned place in the delta region of Sundarbans is the Sagar Islands. There is a reference to the place in Mahabharata. The most sacred place for bathing is located here, known as "Ganga Sagar". Pilgrims from distant places come to take a holy bath at the conflux of the river and Sagar (Ocean). The most popular belief is that if anyone can take a dip in the holy water of Ganga Sagar during the Makar Sankranti, they will attain salvation. During the month of Poush of the Bengali calendar the ritual of this holy bathing is observed.

The islanders perform certain water rituals regularly. They believe the practice of these rituals will protect their lives from any natural catastrophe or wildlife encounters. In the territory of Sundarbans, the native people are mostly dependent on water and forest for survival. Subsistence is very risky both in the forest and in the water. To seek rescue from any perilous situation, the islanders worship Goddess Kali. "The risks of working in water are immense as compared to that of working on land in this region; camouflaged and submerged crocodiles can attack without warning. The worship of Kali can also be attributed to urban encroachment in the delta." (Dasgupta).

Driven by the imperative of survival and livelihood, the people of this region are compelled to venture into the Sundarbans forests by boat to collect its aquatic and forest resources. There is no assurance of a safe return for those who embark on these journeys into the jungle. To avoid these perilous environmental circumstances, family members – anxious to ensure that no harm befalls their loved ones – observe various rituals, prayers, and superstitious practices at home both before the journey begins and throughout the entire duration of the travellers' absence in the jungle. Those who undertake this boat journeys also observe various rituals and superstitions – at home as well as aboard their boats. A distinct "boat culture" has evolved alongside the broader Sundarbans culture since the distant past.

The Sundarbans hold a special significance for those whose lives and livelihoods are intricately connected with this unique environment, often referred to as "Ma Bonbibi's Realm" (*Ma Bonbibir Mahal*). This deep connection inspires local communities to embark on "Journeys to the Realm" (*Mahal-jatra*), where they navigate the waterways of this enchanting region. The boats used for these expeditions are cherished and considered "The Mother's Temple," reflecting the respect and reverence for the natural environment. Through these journeys, people engage with and gather valuable forest and aquatic resources, sustaining both their livelihoods and the rich traditions of the Sundarbans.

The worship of Goddess Bonbibi is also a widely practised traditional cultural form in the Sundarbans, which also includes water as an indispensable element. The islanders believe that facing any kind of danger in the sea is the curse of Goddess Bonbibi. Pleasing the Goddess will bring no harm to them both in water and land. For this reason, before setting out on their journeys through watery ways, they pray to Goddess Bonbibi. Even the wives of the boatmen often vow for a special worship upon the safe return of their husbands. In this way, Goddess Bonbibi also becomes a part of the Sundarbans water-based cultures.

In many instances, the common folks of Sundarbans, unable to bear the costs of cremation or funeral rites, set the bodies afloat in a sacred river. In the past, a dying person

was brought to the banks of the Ganges even before their death. The funeral rites for the majority of the deceased are performed on the banks of the Ganges, or on the banks of any river regarded as a symbolic manifestation of the Ganges. Following the Hindu Custom, the 'bones' of the deceased are brought to the Ganges or to the confluence of the river and the sea. Indeed, death itself is often referred to as 'Gangayatra' (the journey to the Ganges) or 'Gangaprapti' (attainment of the Ganges). According to popular belief, the touch of the sacred waters of the Ganges—the 'Purifier of the Fallen'—washes away all impurities, malice, envy, sins, and sorrows of all humanity. The path to Nirvana becomes smooth, and the soul attains eternal salvation in heaven. The Ganges is simultaneously a Goddess and a mother; the river symbolizes the flow of life and serves as the ultimate source for the purification of all earthly things.

"Bhara Bhasan" is a water-based ritual in Sundarbans. In the 'Bhara Bhasan' ceremony, the procedure for preparing the 'Bhara' (ritual offering) during the month of Jyeshtha involves the following: seventeen different types of leaves, bound together with red thread, are placed upon a new or freshly washed winnowing basket (*kulo*). Additionally, seventeen varieties of fruits, along with sweets made from date palm jaggery or sugarcane jaggery—typically presented on a banana leaf—are arranged within the basket. Subsequently, on a Tuesday, this basket is worshipped—either by a priest or by the devotee herself while observing a fast and maintaining ritual purity. Then this winnowing basket is set afloat in the waters of the Ganges or a local pond on the following Wednesday. This act is known as 'Bhara Bhasano' (setting the 'Bhara' afloat). Since this ritual worship is performed on the Tuesdays of the month of Jyeshtha, these specific days are referred to as 'Joy Mangalbar' (Victorious Tuesday).

Similarly, during the month of *Agrahayana*, women observe fasts and perform worship on four consecutive Tuesdays. On these days, oblations such as seventeen pairs of bananas, radishes, 'Kul' (jajube) fruits, and various leaves are arranged within a winnowing basket; the basket is worshipped on Tuesday and set afloat on Wednesday. This ritual is observed as a form of worship dedicated to Devi Mangalchandi. The 'Bhara Sazano' (arrangement of the 'Bhara') is typically performed by installing a ritual earthen pot ('ghat') dedicated to Mangalchandi near the grain store ('gola') or within the family shrine ('Thakur Ghar'). The act of arranging and worshipping the 'Bhara' on a Tuesday during *Agrahayana* is known as 'Kuli-Mangalbar.' During the Tuesdays of both Jyeshtha and *Agrahayana*, the worship of Mangalchandi is celebrated exclusively by women through the performance of various traditional female rituals ('stree-achar'). It is worth noting that in the Rarh region—particularly in the district of Nadia—a 'Kul' tree laden with fruit is worshipped by ritually envisioning it as the Goddess 'Chandi' herself.

The historical connection between 'Joy Mangalbar' and 'Kuli-Mangalbar' and the realm of maritime commerce is substantiated through an analysis of the prevailing geographical environment and conditions of the era. Viewed through the lens of the geographical context, it can be surmised that during the months of *Agrahayana* and *Paush*, merchant vessels would embark on voyages from Bengal—navigating the waterways of the Bay of Bengal—towards the 'Dakshin Patan' (the southern islands/ports). This timing was chosen because, during this specific period, the rivers and the sea tend to remain calm, and the northerly winds—favorable for sailing—begin to blow. When the northerly wind catches a boat's sail, the vessel can swiftly and effortlessly make its way toward the islands lying to

the south. Due to this geographical factor, during the month of *Agrahayan*, rituals were performed—specifically involving the ceremonial installation and worship of a sacred pitcher ('ghat') dedicated to Mother Mangalchandi. The women used to pray for the well-being of husbands and children who had embarked on distant trading voyages.

The Tuesdays falling within the month of *Agrahayan* are referred to as 'Kuli Mangalbar.' They are designated as such because these Tuesdays are observed with the specific intent of safeguarding the 'kul'(lineage)— that is, protecting the lives of one's husband and children. In its literal sense, the term 'Bhora' refers to a boat. The act of loading indigenous goods onto a boat and launching it into a river or the sea is known as 'Bhora Bhashano' (the launching of the *Bhora*). Once the 'Bhora' has been set afloat in the river, one does not look back; indeed, turning around to cast a backward glance is considered inauspicious. In its true significance, this practice constitutes a psychological subject matter. When merchants set sail for distant foreign lands, the lingering gaze of their loved ones can weigh heavily on their minds, causing distress or anxiety. The folk custom— which dictates that one should avert one's eyes once the merchant vessel (*bhara*) has been launched— serves to validate this psychological truth.

The Tuesdays falling within the month of 'Jyaishta' are known as "Joy-Mangalbar" (Tuesdays of Victory). These days are observed with the specific intent of praying for the safe and unhindered return of merchant vessels to their homeland. It is, in essence, a "Tuesday of Triumph"— a celebratory ritual expressing the collective joy and exuberance associated with a prosperous return from distant foreign shores. Furthermore, within the households of merchants, a sacred earthen pot ('ghat') dedicated to the Goddess Mangalchandi is kept installed throughout the year; this vessel is worshipped daily with offerings of oil, vermilion, water, and flowers.

It is worth noting that, within the corpus of 'Mangalkavya' (narrative poetry of the Mangal tradition), the deities Durga, Chandi, and Manasa are often portrayed as manifestations of the very same Goddess. Bijay Gupta, the renowned poet of the "Manasa Mangal" cycle, sought to convey the concept that these three distinct deities are, in fact, merely different expressions of a single divine entity. Addressing Chand Sadagar, the Goddess Daman-Chandi declared: "Worship Padmavati, O Merchant Chand! Behold, all these forms are but one; do not perceive them as distinct or separate. He whom one perceives as Vishnu is, in truth, Mahadev (Shiva); likewise, behold in Kubera and Varuna, the Sun and the Moon. She whom one recognizes as Bhagavati is, in reality, Vishahari (Manasa); through the grace of Padma, I serve as the vessel that ferries souls across the ocean of worldly existence." (Naskar, 204).

The saga of Chand Sadagar represents maritime culture of ancient time which is prevalent in today also. As water is a crucial medium of commercial purpose, it becomes a source of rituals in remote areas of Sundarbans. They include water in every attempt to safeguard their family members from the rages of the sea. Women transform their husbands' vessels into a temple by placing an idol of Goddess Shashti. This idol serves as a source of divine empowerment in the mid sea during any kind of hazardous circumstances.

Conclusion:

In the modern era, the inherent perils associated with commercial voyages across treacherous waterways have significantly diminished; nevertheless, this deep-seated folk

custom remains very much alive in the hearts of Bengali mothers. Particularly in the regions bordering the Sundarbans, it is customary for certain Hindu households to install a 'ghat' of Mangalchandi within their domestic shrines ('Thakur-ghar'). Here, the vessel is ritually bathed daily with oil, vermilion, and water, followed by formal worship. This ritualistic worship of the 'ghat' is performed solely to invoke the well-being and prosperity of the family. In their true essence, both "Kuli-Mangalbar" and "Joy-Mangalbar" represent ancient folk traditions deeply rooted in the maritime trade practices of the past.

The people of the Sundarbans believe in the myth of the River Ganges, which asserts that holy water is essential for any worship process. Their livelihoods are also dependent on rivers to a great extent. Here also, water acts as a context for worshipping so that their lives could be safe in water in time of serving their daily work. Besides, flood is one of the hazardous catastrophes that can destroy their habitat in a moment. They started to worship water from any River with the chanting of Ganga Mantra. Thus, the significance of holy water evolves in the tradition of Ganga Puja, which is essential before performing any other ritual.

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